

## F. Samaria (4:1-42)

The next stage in Jesus' self-disclosure and public ministry was hugely significant for two reasons: first, it involved the people of *Samaria*, and second, it involved a Samaritan *woman*. The significance might be lost upon contemporary western Christians, but that wouldn't have been the case for John's original audience. And this was all the more true for John himself and Jesus' other disciples. For them, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman was anything but mundane; indeed, they were shocked by it (4:27). It would not be an exaggeration to say that this episode played a crucial role in informing and realigning the disciples' perception of Jesus and His mission as Israel's Messiah, a claim which is vindicated by the history of Samaria and the Samaritan people and their relation to the nation of Israel.

Samaria became prominent as a distinct region (and city) of Canaan during the period of the divided kingdom following David's rule. David's unfaithfulness toward Yahweh in the Bathsheba episode incurred His penalty of dissension, division and desolation (2 Samuel 12:1-10); the Lord's chosen son-king through whom the tribes of Israel were united had now become the cause of Israel's internal alienation and disintegration. The sword of enmity and division first set itself against David's familial household and then turned against the "house" of his kingdom. This rending in Israel continued until it reached a climax in the division of the kingdom under the reign of David's grandson Rehoboam. At that time, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel split off from Rehoboam leaving David's kingdom with only the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin (ref. 1 Kings 12). From that point until the captivities, the household of Israel consisted of the two sub-kingdoms of *Judah* and *Israel* with their respective capitals at Jerusalem and Samaria.

Some two centuries later the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and resettled the land with people taken from other subjugated lands and nations (2 Kings 17:1-24). This was standard practice in the ancient world, for imperial powers recognized that conquered nations left intact posed an ongoing threat by being able to organize an effective resistance movement. Blending together diverse peoples was the most effective way to neuter nationalism and prevent insurrection. The result of this resettling of Israel was that, over time, the Hebrews left in the land began to intermarry with the imported Gentiles. And the pressure to intermarry was all the stronger because, unlike the later situation with the southern kingdom of Judah, there was no mass return of exiled Israelites when Babylon conquered Assyria and assumed its holdings by 600 B.C. Some of the exiles of the northern kingdom returned to their homeland, but the vast majority remained scattered throughout the Middle East.

At the time Jesus was born, the land of Israel consisted primarily of *Jews* – descendents of the people of the southern kingdom of Judah who returned to Judea following the Babylonian captivity, with the region of Samaria in central Palestine populated by *Samaritans* descended from the blended Hebrew-Gentile communities discussed above. These Samaritans were regarded as impure by the returned Judeans and were ostracized throughout the Second Temple period (ref. Ezra 4:1-10). They were not allowed to worship in Jerusalem or participate in Jewish religious life and, consequently, developed their own strain of Judaism and appointed their own place of worship in Samaria. Eventually the Samaritans adopted the Books of Moses (Samaritan Pentateuch) as their sacred scriptures and Mount Gerizim as the site of their worship of Yahweh (hence John 4:19-20).

The Jews regarded the Samaritans as unclean and had nothing to do with them (so the power of Jesus' parable of the "good Samaritan" – Luke 10:25-37; cf. John 8:31-49). If a Jew passed through Samaria in traveling between Judea and Galilee he would do everything in his power to avoid contact with any Samaritans. In fact, many Jews preferred to bypass Samaria altogether by traveling north or south along the Mediterranean coast or through Perea along the east bank of the Jordan, though those routes were longer and the latter made for a more difficult journey.

And so, while it wasn't unusual that Jesus chose to pass through Samaria in traveling from Judea to Galilee (4:3-4), it was shocking that He would stop and converse with a Samaritan. And the outrageousness of this action was only heightened by the fact that He chose to converse with a *woman*. In the Israel of Jesus' day women had few rights and, in some respects, were treated as property. Women could not survive without male support (other than through prostitution) and married women were subject to the interests and desires of their husbands (cf. Matthew 19:1-12). At best, Jewish society regarded women as lesser persons; so for example, they weren't allowed to speak in the synagogues and were segregated from men in worship settings.

One may try to argue that Jesus only spoke with this Samaritan woman because He was alone with her (4:7-8), but John's account shows that His disciples returned from buying food while He was still engaged with her (4:27). Jesus wasn't the least bit ashamed of conversing with her and He wasn't concerned that Jewish norms frowned upon it. Nor was He worried that this encounter might become widely known; in fact, He was fully aware that this woman went back into her town and told everyone she knew about Him. Jesus was Israel's Messiah, but this meant that He was *Samaria's* Messiah (4:28-30, 39-42); indeed, He was Yahweh returned to Zion to liberate the captive creation and heal and regather all of Adam's race (Isaiah 11:1-12, 42:1-7, 49:1-13).

These considerations point to John's reason for including this episode in his account: John's first goal was to outline Jesus' self-disclosure to Israel beginning with the forerunner, John the Baptist; the present episode enlarges the scope of that disclosure, highlighting the important truth that, while Jesus came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, His coming had global designs. As promised in the Scriptures, Yahweh's Servant-Messiah would gather and reunite the remnant of Judah *and* Israel (ref. Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 37; Hosea 1-3; etc.). But this reunification and reconciliation with God would bear its fruit in the ingathering of the nations (Isaiah 11, 49, 53-55; Micah 4:1-8; Zechariah 2, 8, 9:9-17). The Messiah was going to reconstitute the Abrahamic covenant household – form a new *Israel* – in Himself; in this way, Israel would at last fulfill its Abrahamic identity and calling to mediate Yahweh's blessing to all the families of the earth. Jesus had come to Israel in order to gather the whole world to Himself and so to His Father (John 12:31-32) and He testified to this design by extending His self-disclosure and ministrations beyond the children of Israel (cf. Matthew 8:5-13, 12:15-21, 15:21-28; Mark 5:1-20; etc.).

1. John introduced this episode by noting that the Pharisees' awareness of Jesus' activities prompted Him to return to Galilee with His disciples (4:1-3). He provided no further details, but it seems the Pharisees were concerned about Jesus' increasing popularity among the people. They evidently saw Him as a competing counterpart to the Baptist – another self-proclaimed prophet pitching a provocative message in order to gather disciples to Himself. They knew of the messianic claims surrounding Jesus (2:13ff), but they weren't buying it; recent history had seen other alleged messiahs arise in Israel.

Inasmuch as Israel's rulers regarded Jesus as just another man with messianic delusions, there was little reason for them to be concerned with Him. He didn't pose a threat to them, but *Rome* did and the Roman authorities would not tolerate any challenge to their rule. If Jesus gathered enough followers who believed He was the Messiah – Israel's true king, Rome would get word of it and bring the sword against Judea. This scenario had played out only two decades earlier in connection with Judas the Galilean (another messianic claimant) whose insurrection the Romans violently crushed (ref. Acts 5:37). Israel's rulers feared that happening again and would do what they could to avoid it. And so, while John didn't say as much, the indication is that Jerusalem's ruling elite had already determined that Jesus was a growing threat to Israel's well-being (and theirs) and needed to be dealt with. Jesus was aware of this and, being conscious of His mission and its timing, decided it was best to leave Judea and return to Galilee.

2. This journey took Jesus and His disciples through the land of Samaria. As noted earlier, they could have bypassed Samaria by crossing the Jordan River and heading north along its east bank, but John indicated some sort of compulsion in the route they chose (4:4). Many English versions give the impression that the travelers had no choice, but John was emphasizing the *propriety* of this route, not its absolute necessity. As with everything Jesus did, this journey to Galilee was purposeful, and not just in its outcome, but in its process. The group had to travel through Samaria because Samaria was to play a critical role in the outworking of God's purposes in His Son. Jesus knew He *needed* to pass through Samaria because something awaited Him there – something that was vital to His self-disclosure and work and something His disciples needed to learn and understand. The Spirit was leading Him there, whether or not He knew precisely why at that time.
3. As the group traveled north they came to a Samaritan city John identified as *Sychar* (4:5). This city is mentioned nowhere else in the Scripture and so it's impossible to precisely locate it. John provided only two clues: The town was near the parcel of land Jacob had given to Joseph and it was the site of a well connected with Jacob himself.
  - The only well associated with Jacob in the Scripture is the one where he met Rachel after he fled from Esau. That well was near Paddan-aram in the region of Haran (ref. Genesis 28:1-29:4), which is outside of Canaan to the northeast (either in Syria or Mesopotamia) and so cannot be the well in question here.
  - Genesis does, however, note Jacob's purchase of a parcel of land near Shechem (33:18-20) and Joshua's account records that Joseph's bones were buried there and the site was given to Joseph's sons as an inheritance (24:32).

John didn't mention Shechem, but his description of the location clearly connects Sychar with Shechem; indeed some scholars – and at least one Syriac manuscript of John's gospel – identify Sychar as itself the city of Shechem (present day Nablus in the West Bank). Today it is commonly held that Sychar was a small village located near Shechem to the east. This conclusion is supported by the fact that history and tradition agree concerning the location of Jacob's well. That site exists to this day and is located less than a mile from the eastern opening of the valley where Nablus (Shechem) is situated.

The close connection between Sychar and Shechem – which any Jew would have known – suggests that John saw in this episode a greater significance than the encounter itself. *For Shechem played a key role in the salvation history beginning with the patriarchs.*

- a. Notably, the first mention of Shechem is in relation to the *Abrahamic Covenant*. It was the site of Abraham’s first altar in Canaan after God had promised him that land as his inheritance (Genesis 12:1-7). Thus Shechem represented both *sacred space* – Yahweh’s dwelling place with His covenant people – and His *faithfulness* respecting the covenant and its promises. Abraham’s altar at Shechem attested his confidence that the God who had been faithful to His covenant to that point would fulfill His oath to him (cf. Romans 4:13-18; Hebrews 11:8-16).
- b. Years later Abraham’s covenant grandson Jacob also built an altar at Shechem. Jacob had left Canaan when he fled from Esau, but Yahweh met him on the way at Bethel and reaffirmed His covenant commitment and pledged to bring him back to the covenant land (Genesis 28). Two decades later Jacob returned to Canaan and bought a piece of ground near Shechem, there erecting his own altar to *El Elohe Israel* – “God, the God of Israel” (Genesis 33:18-20). By bringing him back to Canaan as He promised at Bethel, Yahweh had indeed shown Himself to be Jacob’s God – Jacob who was now *Israel* (cf. Genesis 28:10-22 with 32:22-30).
- c. If Shechem testified to sacred space and Yahweh’s covenant relationship with Israel, the Abrahamic seed, it also symbolized Israel’s *failure* to fulfill its identity and calling on behalf of God and the world (Genesis 34). For at Shechem the covenant family showed itself unfaithful, first with the people of the land and then among its own members. Jacob’s sons rose up against the men of Shechem, but their seemingly righteous indignation cloaked rebellious hearts filled with idolatry, deceit and violence (Genesis 37-38). Shechem exposed the intrinsic corruption of the covenant house while still in its infancy and that city would later see Israel’s corruption in full flower during the time of its maturity (1 Kings 12).

In spite of its election as Yahweh’s “firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22-23), Israel was plagued by the same alienation and enmity as the people He pledged to drive from the land – the people before whom Israel was to bear the Lord’s name and image. *Shechem bore witness to the tragic truth that the very people God chose as His instrument for bringing reconciliation, renewal and peace to the world were in need of the same remedy.* What the man Israel (Jacob) asserted by his altar the household of Israel denied by its actions (cf. again 33:20, 34:1-35:4).

- d. As early as Jacob’s day Shechem had become a symbol of Israel’s rebellion and idolatry, but this didn’t supplant its former significance. Rather, Shechem’s association with Israel’s unfaithfulness only highlighted by way of contrast its fundamental relation to Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant. So it was that Shechem (situated between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal) later served as the setting for the reaffirmation of the covenant and its obligation after Israel entered the covenant land (cf. Deuteronomy 27 with Joshua 8:30-35 and 24:1-28).